

United Through Reading

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When NMCB 74 started preparing for their current deployment, they packed the usual military gear for Seabees...construction equipment, weapons, desert gear, etc. However, there were a few things that most people would not expect to see a Naval Mobile Construction Battalion carry on deployment. These include 600 blank videotapes, video cameras and cases full of children's books. The "unusual" equipment is for a program called Uniting Through Reading. This is a quality of life program that allows deployed service members to read books to their children while being video taped. The battalion supplies the videotapes for the service member. The service member records the tape then mails it home. The recipients have included children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, brothers, sisters or and even a Sunday school class to watch and read along.

On their last deployment, NMCB 74 spent time in Guam, Kuwait (Operation Enduring Freedom) and Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom). They maintained the program at two of these sites at any given time and produced well over 200 tapes. Every time they moved to a new location in the desert, the box of children's books was packed and moved with them. Even in some of the most remote areas of the desert, cameras were being plugged into generators and children were being read to by their parents. As a result, NMCB 74 became the first Seabee battalion to implement Uniting Through Reading, which is now being instituted across the entire Naval Construction Force. Permanent libraries and taping equipment are now placed at their permanent deployment sites in Guam, Rota Spain and Okinawa Japan.

Using lessons learned from the last deployment, NMCB 74 brought more cameras, TV/VCR's, blank videotapes, and extra books donated from supporters. Currently, they are running the program at four sites: Iraq, Spain, Croatia and Ghana. Each group was given a video camera, TV/VCR, videotapes, a Seabee flag for a backdrop, and children's books packed in a cargo box. Now, with a little encouragement from service members who have made tapes, the program has sprung to life. Currently, all sites are producing several tapes each week.

The benefits of this program have been tremendous. For the children, the program encourages reading and helps improve their literacy skills. It also helps to reduce the anxiety a child feels while separated from their parent. This is because they have the opportunity to see their parent's face, hear their voice and have the parent interact with them through reading. For infants and toddlers it seems to help the child remember their parent's voice and face. When the service member returns home, the infant usually recognizes the returning parent instantly.

For the deployed service members, the benefit becomes apparent when you see the smile on their face after they make a tape. Although both may be separated by thousands of miles, the parent still has the chance to be a part of their family's life by reading and speaking to there loved ones.

So in the future, if you ask a Seabee if he's read a good book lately, his or her answer may be 'yes'... "The Cat in the Hat", "If You Give a Pig a Pancake", or "The Rainbow Fish."